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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001496

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SUBJECT: STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS UPDATE--FOUR WEEKS AWAY

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: President Chavez is campaigning hard for his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) candidates in the run-up to the November 23 state and local elections. Chavez is conceding no electoral races, even in opposition strongholds, and is equating votes for PSUV candidates with a vote for him. While the opposition has united in most gubernatorial and many key mayoral races, divisions with the opposition continue to undermine its electoral prospects in some emblematic races. Opposition leaders are starting to try to temper supporters' electoral expectations, focusing attention on which races the oppositions may win, rather than how many. The opposition appears to be strongest in the most populated and resource-rich states. At a month out, the opposition appears capable of winning some six out of 22 governorships and staying competitive in five other gubernatorial races, while possibly more than doubling the number of mayorships it currently controls. End Summary.

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CHAVEZ CEDING NO STATE  
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12. (C) Chavez has told his supporters that he wants his PSUV candidates to win all 22 gubernatorial races, and he has campaigned extensively on their behalf. Conceding no races, Chavez has spent considerable time in Zulia and Nueva Esparta states, the only two states that elected opposition governors in 2004. On his second trip to the opposition stronghold of Nueva Esparta on October 21, he stumped for PSUV candidate William Farinas, asking voters to "remove" opposition candidate Morel Rodriguez because he is a "student of the school of Carlos Andres Perez," a former president from the Accion Democratica party. Chavez threatened that it would be "difficult" to help local residents either under Rodriguez or without "revolutionaries" in all of the 11 Nueva Esparta mayorships. He also contended that residents of Caracas had gone to the state to plot a military-backed assassination. According to the latest Seijas poll (government-leaning), only 38 percent of respondents believe Chavez's allegations of a "magnicidio" plot, but the President and his supporters continue to harp on these claims as a way to divert attention from domestic problems.

13. (C) Chavez visited Miranda state October 22 to stump for Diosdado Cabello, the current governor and PSUV candidate, who is facing tough competition from two-term Baruta borough mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski. The GBRV reopened a criminal case against Capriles Radonski on October 17 despite his 2006 acquittal on charges of inciting violence at the

Cuban Embassy during the April 2002 interregnum. According to a recent Seijas poll, Cabello leads Carpiles Radonski 40 to 37 percent. Opposition pundits have told us that Radonski is actually leading in other polls. Cabello, who is close to the President, is probably suffering from allegations that he has used public office for self-enrichment and the inability of his government to curb the skyrocketing crime rate in urban areas of Miranda State. Seijas reports that 86 percent of those polled nation-wide listed insecurity as the principle problem facing the state, followed by traffic, trash collection, and other unsolved infrastructure problems.

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OPPOSITION DIVISIONS LINGER  
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¶4. (C) Although the opposition is poised to make some gains in the upcoming elections, infighting in several races among opposition candidates has prevented much-needed unity that could inadvertently hand victories to PSUV rivals. In Bolivar state, Seijas polling indicates PSUV gubernatorial candidate and current governor Francisco Rangel Gomez would be in a dead heat against opposition candidate and former governor Antonio Rojas Suarez in a two-way race. Andres Velazquez of the labor-oriented Causa-R party, however, is also running and would apparently split Rojas Suarez's support in a three-way race. Seijas reports that Rangel Gomez currently enjoys 31 percent support while Rojas Suarez and Velazquez each have 16 percent support. There is a rumor in opposition circles that the GBRV is quietly backing Rojas Suarez, a former Chavez supporter, to split opposition votes.

¶5. (C) Anzoategui state also appears to be a missed opportunity for the opposition. PSUV candidate and current governor Tarek William Saab has high unfavorability ratings,

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particularly compared to opposition candidate Gustavo Marcano and novelty candidate Benjamin Rausseo. Rausseo, however, is so far unwilling to drop out of the race for the sake of opposition unity. Marcano was designated the unity opposition candidate, but Rausseo -- a comedian and businessman who briefly ran in the 2006 presidential elections -- joined the race nevertheless. According to Seijas, the best scenario for the opposition would be a two-way race between Saab and Marcano, although Saab still leads Marcano by a substantial margin.

¶6. (C) The opposition has failed to consolidate consensus candidacies in three of Caracas' five boroughs. Three opposition candidates are running for the Chacao Borough mayorship, and the local media has given prominent coverage to the lack of unity there. Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) Political Director Angel Emiro Vera told us that the opposition is sure to win the seat regardless, but the emblematic race is damaging the opposition's image more broadly. Popular Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez is backing his own candidate against his UNT party's candidate in what is widely perceived as a proxy war between UNT leader and Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales and Lopez. In the upscale El Hatillo Borough the UNT and AD candidates have vowed not to withdraw. In the downtown Libertador Borough, former VP Jorge Rodriguez, while not a strong candidate, is considered a shoe-in, in part because the opposition is still running two well-known candidates, including student leader Stalin Gonzalez.

¶7. (C) Chavez asked the National Electoral Council (CNE) to disqualify Patria Para Todos (PPT) Guarico State gubernatorial candidate Lenny Manuitt, claiming current governor Eduardo Manuitt -- who is not eligible for reelection -- is using Lenny, his daughter, as a front to remain in power. PPT is a small pro-government party that is supporting PSUV candidates in many states, but not in the Guarico gubernatorial race. The opposition's consensus candidate in that state, popular folk singer Reinaldo Armas, has vowed to stay in the race until the end. Manuitt could

have an outside chance of defeating PSUV candidate William Lara, but only if Armas drops out. UNT's Angel Emiro Vera told us that the opposition had quietly suggested its willingness to concede and back PPT instead, but was rebuffed for fear of losing votes because of the opposition affiliation.

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TEMPERING EXPECTATIONS  
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¶18. (C) Opposition leaders tell us they are trying to temper public expectations of opposition victories. UNT Political Director Angel Emiro Vera said the opposition seeks to focus supporters' attention on "which" states and municipalities the opposition carries, rather than "how many." Vera concedes the PSUV will win the majority of the governor and mayorships, but like many other opposition contacts, believes opposition parties will do best in the states and cities with the largest populations and most resources. Consensus opposition Merida State gubernatorial candidate William Davila told PolCouns October 23 that he is cautiously optimistic that the opposition will win six or seven governorships (including Merida) and over 100 mayorships. He said he is advocating that the opposition spin the eventual results as an "advance" rather than exaggerate their electoral potential.

¶19. (C) Podemos National Assembly Deputy Ricardo Gutierrez told PolCouns October 23 that he is bullish on the opposition's electoral prospects, but expects President Chavez to circumvent and squeeze state and local entities won by opposition candidates. Gutierrez also predicted Chavez would increasingly use violence and intimidation to maintain power, even at the expense of his democratic legitimacy. He expressed particular concern with ongoing GBRV efforts to provide paramilitary training to community councils and the potential role of state-sponsored popular militias.

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CNE PREPARING THE GROUND  
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¶10. (SBU) The National Electoral Council (CNE) has begun preparations for the election. The CNE started auditing voter rolls on October 21, with one percent of the overall registry being reviewed by representatives of various opposition parties. The CNE also has installed 125 voting

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machines equipped with mock ballots in metro stations throughout Caracas for public use. CNE rectors convened on October 16 to discuss, and ultimately dismiss, the token investigation into charges of unbalanced coverage against state-owned Venezuela TV. Following the October 19 country-wide blackout -- the third this year -- the CNE reassured voters that a blackout on election day would not impede voting because the machines were equipped with 12-hour batteries. The CNE also noted that polling stations could revert to paper ballots, if necessary.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) Four weeks before state and local elections, the opposition appears to be in a good position to build on its 2004 low-water mark of two governorships (four if formerly pro-government Podemos governors are included). Opposition consensus candidates and Chavez dissident candidates are capable of winning in six, and conceivably up to 11, of the 22 total governorships. They are likely to do well in wealthy, urban areas -- including the mayorships of state capitals -- while the Chavez's electoral machine will probably prove more effective in the rural areas of the country. Unlike in the run-up to the December 2007

constitutional referendum when Chavez traveled abroad frequently, Chavez is campaigning hard throughout Venezuela. According to local pundits, Chavez's endorsement still gives PSUV candidates a big electoral boost, although pollsters tell us that Venezuelans are increasingly looking at the qualities/plans of individual candidates, rather than their party orientation.

CAULFIELD